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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 005515

LONDON FOR TUELLER; PARIS FOR ALLEGRONE

E.O. 12356: DECL: 10/19/2005

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SUBJECT: SYRIANS SEE PLOTS AND PRESSURE,
QUESTION U.S. MOTIVES

11. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

12. SUMMARY. IN THE CONTINUING ABSENCE OF FOREIGN MINISTER SHARA IN CARTAGENA AND NEW YORK, SENIOR MFA OFFICIALS HAVE TAKEN EVERY AVAILABLE OPPORTUNITY SHORT OF CALLING US IN TO VENT THEIR SPLEENS OVER WHAT THEY SEE AS RENEWED ATTEMPTS TO PUT PRESSURE ON SYRIA AND WEAKEN ITS POSITION VIS-A-VIS ISRAEL. OUR MFA INTERLOCUTORS HAVE FOCUSED ON TWO RECENT DEVELOPMENTS: (A) WHAT THEY VIEW AS AN "UNBALANCED" U.S. POSTURE ON RECENT EVENTS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON AND (B) "TENDENTIOUS" ACCUSATIONS THAT COUNTERFEIT U.S. CURRENCY MAY BE PRODUCED IN SYRIA OR LEBANON. SHARA WOULD CERTAINLY ASSOCIATE HIMSELF WITH THEIR VIEWS, AND THIS MAY ADD AN EDGE TO ANY FUTURE HIGH-LEVEL CONTACTS. END SUMMARY.

13. ON OCTOBER 18, DEPUTY FOREIGN MINISTER SHAKKUR AND MFA AMERICAS DIRECTOR JAZZAR SOUGHT THE AMBASSADOR OUT SEPARATELY AT A RECEPTION TO COMPLAIN ABOUT (A) WHAT THEY VIEW AS AN "UNBALANCED" U.S. POSTURE ON RECENT EVENTS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON, AS EXEMPLIFIED IN THE DEPARTMENT'S OCTOBER 16 PRESS BRIEFING, AND (B) "TENDENTIOUS" ACCUSATIONS THAT COUNTERFEIT U.S. CURRENCY MAY BE PRODUCED IN SYRIA OR LEBANON AND PROTECTED BY THE SYRIAN MILITARY, AS "MANY AT THE STATE DEPARTMENT" CONSIDER TO BE A "FACT," ACCORDING TO AN ARTICLE IN THE OCTOBER 23 ISSUE OF "THE NEW YORKER." THEY REACTED TO BOTH DEVELOPMENTS ALONG SIMILAR LINES.

14. ON OUR POSTURE WITH REGARD TO SOUTHERN LEBANON, AS ENUNCIATED OCTOBER 16, THEY ARGUED THAT:

-- NO ONE SHOULD FORGET -- AS IT WOULD APPEAR MANY HAVE -- THAT SOUTHERN LEBANON REMAINS UNDER ISRAELI OCCUPATION, THAT HIZBALLAH IS EXERCISING THE LEGITIMATE RIGHT OF LEBANESE TO RESIST OCCUPATION FORCES, AND THAT THIS RIGHT IS BEING EXERCISED AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF DAILY SHELLING AND BOMBING OF LEBANESE VILLAGES AND NUMEROUS CIVILIAN CASUALTIES.

-- HIZBALLAH, AS A FORCE THAT CRYSTALLIZES LEBANESE OPPOSITION TO ISRAELI OCCUPATION, EXPRESSES THIS OPPOSITION INDEPENDENTLY OF OUTSIDE ACTORS.

-- SYRIA RECOGNIZES THE RIGHT OF LEBANESE TO RESIST THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION THROUGH ATTACKS ON ISRAELI MILITARY PERSONNEL IN THE OCCUPIED ZONE. AT THE SAME TIME, IT RECOGNIZES THAT AN ESCALATION OF THE SITUATION COULD HARM THE PEACE PROCESS.

-- SYRIA DOES HAVE INFLUENCE WITH HIZBALLAH AND HAS USED IT ON MANY OCCASIONS IN THE PAST, WHEN VIOLENCE HAS ESCALATED TO A DANGEROUS LEVEL AND WHEN SYRIA WAS SATISFIED THAT WE WERE URGING RESTRAINT ON THE ISRAELIS TO TAMP DOWN WHAT WE HAVE TRADITIONALLY CALLED "THE CONTINUING CYCLE OF VIOLENCE."

-- ON THIS OCCASION, HOWEVER, WE CHOSE TO SOLICIT SYRIAN ASSISTANCE "IN AN INCOMPREHENSIBLE MANNER." FIRST, OF ALL, WE DID IT IN PUBLIC. SECOND OF ALL, WE GROUNDED OUR SOLICITATION IN WHAT WAS, FOR ALL INTENTS AND PURPOSES, THE ISRAELI VIEW OF EVENTS, ABANDONING OUR TRADITIONAL

-- AND MINIMALLY ACCEPTABLE -- LINE ABOUT "THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE," CALLING LEBANESE RESISTANCE "TERRORISM," ESCHEWING ANY MENTION OF THE CONTEXT OF THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION, FOCUSING EXCLUSIVELY ON ISRAELI LOSSES, AND FOCUSING ON SYRIA AS THE PARTY PRINCIPALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR CONTROLLING THE LEVEL OF VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN LEBANON.

-- ALL OF THIS LED SYRIAN LEADERS TO QUESTION ONCE AGAIN THE IMPARTIALITY OF THE U.S. AS "AN HONEST BROKER" IN THE PEACE PROCESS AND TO SUSPECT THAT "CERTAIN PEOPLE" HAD ENGINEERED A CHANGE IN OUR STANCE.

15. ON THE ALLEGATION THAT SYRIA MIGHT BE THE LOCUS OF COUNTERFEITING, THE AMBASSADOR'S INTERLOCUTORS NOTED THAT:

-- NOT ONCE DURING THE SUCCESSIVE VISITS OF EXPERT DELEGATIONS TO SYRIA HAD THIS POSSIBILITY BEEN MENTIONED.

-- SYRIA HAD NO CAPABILITY TO PRODUCE NOTES OF THE HIGH QUALITY BEING CITED. IF IT DID, IT WOULD HAVE NO NEED TO HAVE ITS OWN CURRENCY PRINTED ABROAD.

-- FURTHERMORE, SYRIA HAD NO INTEREST IN BRINGING THE INTEGRITY OF U.S. CURRENCY INTO QUESTION, "SINCE EVERY SYRIAN PROBABLY HOLDS QUANTITIES OF DOLLARS."

-- AS A MATTER OF POLICY, SYRIA WAS DEEPLY OPPOSED TO COUNTERFEITING OF ANY KIND AND WAS SUPPORTING ONGOING LEBANESE EFFORTS TO TRACK DOWN COUNTERFEITERS ACTIVE IN LEBANON.

-- AGAIN, AS WITH OUR "NEW STANCE" ON SOUTHERN LEBANON, SYRIAN LEADERS HAD TO QUESTION THE MOTIVES OF THOSE WHO HAD FLOATED THIS TENDENTIOUS ALLEGATION.

16. THE AMBASSADOR NOTED TO SHAKKUR AND JAZZAR THAT WE REMAINED OPPOSED TO VIOLENCE AND COMMITTED TO NEGOTIATIONS AS A WAY OF BRINGING THE ISRAELI PRESENCE IN SOUTHERN LEBANON TO AN END, THAT INDEED WE LOOKED TO SYRIA TO HELP CALM THE SITUATION, AND THAT WE WERE UNDOUBTEDLY LOOKING TO THE ISRAELIS TO DO THE SAME. NEITHER WAS CONVINCED, CITING ONCE AGAIN THE "ONE-SIDED" STANCE WE HAD TAKEN ON OCTOBER 16 AND THE INAPPROPRIATENESS OF USING A PUBLIC FORUM TO SEEK SYRIAN HELP.

17. THE AMBASSADOR ALSO NOTED THAT, TO THE BEST OF HIS INFORMATION, WE DID NOT BELIEVE THAT SYRIA WAS THE LOCUS OF COUNTERFEITING OF U.S. CURRENCY AND THAT THE SOURCES CITED BY "THE NEW YORKER" WERE EITHER MISINFORMED OR SPECULATING. IT HAD BEEN AGREED AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF OUR TWO GOVERNMENTS THAT WE WOULD WORK TOGETHER TO COUNTER THIS ACTIVITY, AND WE LOOKED FORWARD TO CONTINUING TO DO SO.

¶8. SHAKKUR CLOSED OFF THE DISCUSSION BY EMPHASIZING THAT, IF ANYONE IN THE U.S. THOUGHT THAT PRESSURE TACTICS WOULD WORK WITH SYRIA, THEY COULD NOT BE MORE WRONG. PRESSURE MERELY INCREASED THE RESOLVE OF SYRIAN LEADERS TO STAY THE COURSE. PRESIDENT CLINTON AND SECRETARY CHRISTOPHER UNDERSTOOD THE PROPER WAY TO DEAL WITH THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP, BUT "OTHERS" EVIDENTLY DID NOT.

¶9. ON OCTOBER 19, JAZZAR WENT ON THE OFFENSIVE AGAIN DURING A MEETING WITH POLOFF ON THE UPCOMING CUBAN RESOLUTION AT THE UNGA. HE DESCRIBED OUR OCTOBER 16 STATEMENT AS "HORRIBLE" AND ASKED AGAIN WHY WE HAD MADE SUCH A MAJOR CHANGE IN OUR CUSTOMARY LINE ON THIS ISSUE. "WHY IS THE U.S. ASKING SYRIA TO USE ITS INFLUENCE WITH HIZBALLAH TO PREVENT LEGITIMATE RESISTANCE TO ISRAEL'S OCCUPATION OF SOUTHERN LEBANON? IT SOUNDS AS IF YOU HAVE ENDORSED THE OCCUPATION AND THAT YOU CONDEMN ALL RESISTANCE TO IT." JAZZAR WENT ON TO SAY THAT "SYRIA CAN SWALLOW, ALTHOUGH WITH A GRIMACE," OUR CUSTOMARY RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS ON THIS ISSUE, BUT THE LATEST STATEMENT WAS A MAJOR DEPARTURE.

¶10. POLOFF READ JAZZAR THE DEPARTMENT'S GUIDANCE ON RECENT VIOLENCE IN SOUTHERN LEBANON (STATE 254743). JAZZAR REPLIED THAT "THIS IS YOUR USUAL STATEMENT, BUT IT IS NOT WHAT MR. BURNS SAID. HE SAID MUCH MORE THAN THAT. WHAT HE SAID GIVES HIZBALLAH MORE CREDIBILITY. THE RESISTANCE IS NOT ATTACKING CHILDREN OR CIVILIANS. IT IS ATTACKING MILITARY TARGETS -- THE ISRAELI OCCUPATION FORCE. THAT IS NOT TERRORISM. SYRIA WILL NOT TAKE STEPS TO STOP LEGITIMATE RESISTANCE TO OCCUPATION."

¶11. AN OCTOBER 18 EDITORIAL IN THE ENGLISH-LANGUAGE "SYRIA TIMES" ECHOED THESE THEMES: THE DEPARTMENTAL SPOKESMAN'S OCTOBER 16 STATEMENT "WAS NOT IN LINE WITH THE DECLARED U.S. POLICY THAT SUPPORTED THE IMPLEMENTATION OF U.N. RESOLUTIONS." REFLECTING THE FEELING THAT THE STATEMENT DIFFERED FROM PREVIOUS ONES, THE EDITORIAL CONTINUED THAT "PRESSURE SHOULD NOT BE DIRECTED AGAINST THE VICTIMS, BUT AGAINST THE OPPRESSORS." PREDICTABLY, IT WENT ON TO SAY THAT "OPERATIONS AGAINST OCCUPATION ARE A KIND OF SELF-DEFENSE, NO MATTER WHAT THE U.S. STATE DEPARTMENT THINKS OR SAYS."

¶12. COMMENT: SHARA WOULD CERTAINLY ASSOCIATE HIMSELF WITH SUCH VIEWS. COMBINED WITH STANDING SYRIAN COMPLAINTS ABOUT BEING SINGLED OUT FOR BLAME OVER THE IMPASSE IN THE SYRIAN TRACK, "WHEN RABIN HIMSELF DOES NOT WANT TO MOVE," AND LINGERING SYRIANS SUSPICIONS ABOUT OUR PATTERN OF CONSULTATIONS ON IRAQ, THESE NEW CONCERNS MAY WELL ADD AN EDGE TO FUTURE HIGH-LEVEL CONTACTS BETWEEN OUR TWO GOVERNMENTS.

¶13. THE BEST WAY TO GET SYRIA TO REIN HIZBALLAH IN HAS ALWAYS BEEN TO USE PRIVATE APPROACHES FIRST AND THEN BUTTRESS THEM WITH PUBLIC STATEMENTS THAT CALL ON ALL PARTIES WITH A ROLE IN SOUTHERN LEBANON TO HELP CALM THE SITUATION. EVEN IF THE SYRIANS FIND IT IN THEIR INTEREST TO COUNSEL RESTRAINT ON HIZBALLAH ON THIS OCCASION, OUR LATEST STATEMENTS HAVE RUBBED THEM IN ALL THE WRONG WAYS, INCREASING THEIR FEARS THAT THEY ARE BEING PRESSURED AND ISOLATED AND POTENTIALLY MAKING THEM EVEN MORE RIGID IN DISCUSSING THE PEACE PROCESS.

¶14. SIMILARLY, THE SPECULATIVE STATEMENTS OF UNNAMED DEPARTMENTAL OFFICIALS ON SYRIA'S ALLEGED ROLE IN PRINTING COUNTERFEIT U.S. CURRENCY WILL

NOT ONLY RENDER FUTURE COOPERATION IN TRACKING THE
CULPRITS DOWN MORE DIFFICULT, BUT WILL ALSO FEED
THE SAME FEARS OF PRESSURE AND ISOLATION.

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